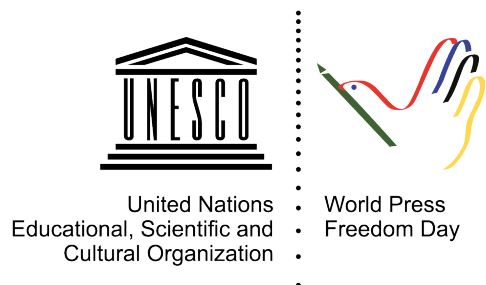**World Press Freedom Conference 2020**

Journalism without fear or favour

18 – 20 October | World Forum | The Hague | The Netherlands

CONCEPT NOTE

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

World Press
Freedom Day

NL Kingdom of
the Netherlands

1. Introduction: why independent media matter

On 3 May 2020, UNESCO will lead the celebration of the 27th annual World Press Freedom Day (WPFD). UNESCO and the Kingdom of the Netherlands had planned to hold the World Press Freedom Conference (WPFC) from 22 to 24 April at the World Forum in The Hague, a city known for its role in international peace and justice. In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, the conference is now scheduled for 18 to 20 October at the same venue. The event will be a joint celebration of World Press Freedom Day and the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists (2 November).

The focus this year is on taking action to secure independent journalism. This call is to everyone who has a role to play- including governments, journalists and media, the judiciary and legal sector, Internet businesses, civil society, academia and the youth. The focus for WPFD 2020 is on successes in enhancing professional journalism and its foundation on independent news media institutions.

Independence is a key element in the 1991 Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press, which led the UN to proclaim World Press Freedom Day in 1993. The Declaration recognizes that press freedom requires not only laws that provide strong guarantees for freedom of expression, but also conditions that ensure media pluralism and which enable journalism that is editorially independent.

Today, it is timely to highlight such independence as a necessary condition for the fulfillment of press freedom. This is because persisting and new forms of control of media threaten journalism's role in providing the public with reliable facts, inclusive views and a diversity of cultural expressions.[1] Yet there is also a growing movement to bring reality closer to the Windhoek ideals by freeing journalism from controls that impede editorial independence. This is essential if humanity is to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that include achieving peace, justice and the rule of law for which press freedom is indispensable.

Independent and professional journalists, along with an independent judiciary, play a key part in preventing the capture of state power for private purposes. When these groups are protected, they can help ensure

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[1] Recognition of the importance of editorial independence and diversity of the media is integrated into UNESCO's Media Development Indicators and the Internet Universality Indicators, as well as monitored in the frame of the Organisation's reports on *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development and Re-Shaping Cultural Policies*.

accountability of power holders and duty-bearers for protecting human rights and for progress on sustainable development.

The WPFD 2020 theme coincides with the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. For this anniversary, Member States have affirmed a commitment to multilateralism, which is key to upholding universal norms of peace and human rights.[2] This context provides an opportunity for the celebration of WPFD to enhance co-operation between Member States and encourage multi-stakeholder coalitions to protect press freedom and safety of journalists which are necessary conditions for media independence.

2. The WPFD 2020 theme in brief

Journalism today undergoes many pressures from actors trying to capture or intimidate media in order to hamper journalists in their daily work and by doing so, influence the flow of information. In addition, the ongoing revolution in communications technology and the rise of major Internet companies pose another challenge to independent journalism and – through that – to the value that press freedom has for society. These developments make the role of journalism in societies more distinctive and precious than ever, which is also why there is mounting action in favour of media and journalistic independence across the world.

Historically, take-overs of news have been exercised through political and economic controls over media institutions. These were through state ownership of media, as well as through media barons, media monopolies, advertisers' interferences and public relations manipulation. In recent times, these enduring challenges have intensified as advertising-reliant business models for news media lose ground to Internet companies. Meanwhile, longstanding male-gender predominance in media is another factor that affects editorial integrity.

Today, the concerns about independence of journalism have extended to additional issues. These include major Internet companies having become the primary curators of journalistic and cultural content, and some of them operating business models that have promoted disinformation and hate speech at the expense of prominence to journalism.

On top of this, there is an increase in incitement to hostility against targeted news outlets and individual reporters, and of intimidation via digital channels where women journalists and artists are especially subjected to attack.

Taken together, these developments are leading to cases of public interest being supplanted by vested powerful interests. These forces undermine professional journalistic standards, and they skew the kinds of

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[2] http://research.un.org/

information and cultural content which individuals are accessing. The result is far from the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 which recognizes society's need for "public access to information and fundamental freedoms".

At the same time, people worldwide are developing successful strategies to address the classic as well as newer challenges to media independence. WPFD 2020 is an opportunity to showcase, celebrate and learn from these experiences.

3. Editorial independence challenged by various forms of media capture

Editorial independence is not possible when media outlets are set up, taken over or manipulated by actors who weaken or distort the core journalistic standards of verification of facts and ethical publishing in the public interest.[3] This phenomenon is referred to by analysts as "media capture". Press freedom is about autonomy from narrow interests. At the same time, it also has to entail strong professional standards if there is to be substance to the meaning of independence.[4] These are two sides of the same coin.

It is precisely the potential of independent and professional journalism to expose abuse of power and hold power holders to account that renders it a prime target for capture.[5] The actors in media capture range from political forces through to private businesses and other interest groups. By exerting power over media discourses and perverting basic journalistic ethics and standards, captors seek to further political, religious, ideological or financial objectives. The common element is that they all serve to sway news away from keeping power accountable.[6]

In recent years, there has also been a rise in public figures using hostile action and discourse intended to intimidate journalists and spread distrust in professional reporting. Within the UN, several resolutions have warned about the potential consequences of such rhetoric and stressed support for the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

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[3] Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, cited in https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/article/1174/cima-media-capture-book-f.pdf, p. 2

[4] This point links to the kind of capture has been described as "cognitive capture", which results from overly-close association between reporters and the groups in power whom they cover. Stiglitz, J. E. 2017. Toward a taxonomy of media capture https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jstiglitz/sites/jstiglitz/files/Capture2_Taxonomy-of-Media-Capture.pdf

[5] Schiffrin, A. 2017. In the service of power: media capture and the threat to democracy. Washington, DC and New York: Center for International Media Assistance and Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/service-power-media-capture-threat-democracy/

[6] A partial bibliography on media capture is available from the Forum Media and Development, and can be found at https://fome.info/events/symposium-2018/literature

In the sections that follow, more detail is given to how editorial integrity and independence are impacted by capture and attacks, to issues posed by the role of Internet companies for independent journalism, and to the place of gender dimensions in the equation. In this, attention is also given to the many actors and strategies that are responding to these challenges.

4. Curtailing the corrosion of news by political and business interests

Political control over news media by governments as well as by opposition politicians is a much-observed form of media capture. Governmental control often exploits public ownership of media assets, and the patronage power of state advertising budgets, in order to favour selected media outlets and penalise others. Political capture has also been effected by preventing or compromising the independence of communications licensing and regulatory bodies. The weaker the private media, the more vulnerable it is to purchase by patrons or other entities with interests that go against independent journalism.

Concentration of ownership and unlimited cross-ownership in privately-owned communications industries continues to enable the weakening of editorial independence. There is also the co-option of media by hidden shareholders with political motives.[7] Entities as diverse as the European Commission and the Inter-American Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression are raising concerns about media pluralism and diversity in their regions, and many actors are pressing for the enforcement of competition laws.[8] Others are working for transparency of ownership, as well as effective regulation to prevent abuse of state advertising budgets.[9] Strong institutional protections are needed for editorial independence in state-owned media enterprises. The solution also requires communications regulators to be independent of external interests. For the arts and culture sectors, public policies and regulations can protect and promote the integrity and emergence of free and diverse cultural expressions, a vital contribution to any flourishing democracy. Robust self-regulation for news media institutions is essential for their own accountability for upholding editorial standards.

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[7] See the Media Ownership Monitor of Reporters Sans Frontières. http://www.mom-rsf.org/ The Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has also lifted the lid on shell companies, often registered offshore, used to hide the identity of media owners https://www.occrp.org/en

[8] Nelson, M.M. 2017. What is to be done? Options for combatting the menace of media capture. In Schiffrin, A. (ed). 2017. *In the service of power: Media capture and the threat to democracy*. Center for International Media Assistance: Washington DC.

[9] See Mendel, T., Garcia Castillejo, A, and Gomez, G. 2017. *Concentration of Media Ownership and Freedom of Expression: Global Standards and Implications for the Americas*. UNESCO Montevideo Office: Montevideo. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248091; Becerra, M and Mastrini, G. 2019. *La convergencia de medios, telecomunicaciones e internet en la perspectiva de la competencia: Hacia un enfoque multicomprensivo*. UNESCO Montevideo Office: Montevideo.

Strengthening journalistic ethics is also part of the picture as a response to corruption of individual journalists which also compromises editorial integrity.[10]

The development of alternative journalistic platforms, the inclusion in media of voices of young people, and innovations in ownership and business models, are further steps that can support enhanced diversity, transparency and journalistic integrity. Exposing the lucrative business of undisclosed sponsorship, such as in the cases of some bloggers and "influencers", is another measure being undertaken.

Media capture can in some instances be facilitated by "a pliant judiciary to prosecute independent journalists."[11] In order for judicial officials to be able to effectively safeguard press freedom, journalistic safety and media independence, laws and systems should be in place to adequately protect them as well as freedom of expression. Many international institutions and parliaments are working to entrench an enabling legal environment for judicial independence. UNESCO and others are working with judges, prosecutors and lawyers around the world to promote better understanding of international standards for freedom of expression as these relate to the legal sphere. These steps can restrain political and business capture of the judiciary and the media as precious social institutions.

There is progress in all these areas and inspiring stories to share.

Points to ponder

1. *What legal and policy approaches are helping to protect or restore editorial independence in the media sector, the integrity of regulators, and the fair allocation of state advertising?*
2. *What innovative approaches are successfully curbing media concentration and opaque ownership, as well as diversifying media ownership?*
3. *What cases show the value of an independent judiciary protecting freedom of expression and fending off capture?*
4. *What steps are journalists, civil society and others taking to strengthen self-regulation as part of accountability for independence and editorial integrity?*
5. *How do the issues of capture and attacks on media impact on freedom of artistic expression?*

5. Making media independence a factor for gender equality

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[10] See the Ethical Journalism Network https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/ and RSF's Journalism Trust Initiative, https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-and-its-partners-unveil-journalism-trust-initiative-combat-disinformation
[11] Stiglitz, Joseph,E. 2017. Toward a taxonomy of media capture
https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jstiglitz/sites/jstiglitz/files/Capture2_Taxonomy-of-Media-Capture.pdf

Another dimension of power that impacts on the extent to which journalism serves society inclusively and advances the Sustainable Development Goals is the predominance of men in media leadership positions. Recent studies have found that men hold 73% of top management positions in key media institutions.[12] A similar pattern is evident in media ownership.

This imbalance correlates with relative blindspots in media in regard to female staff, and gender portrayal and stereotyping. Further, recent surveys have found that in many places women journalists and artists are disproportionately targeted by online harassment, threats, sexist hate speech and trolling.[13] Despite a growing awareness of the problem, many news organizations have been slow to deal with these issues. In addition, in many societies, restrictions and censorship of artistic expressions particularly discriminate against women artists and female audiences. This demotivates and restricts women in exercising their rights, and can lead to self-censorship.

Gendered control is often also tied up with intersectional inequalities including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. Youth is another intersectional issue, and these inequalities need to be addressed if independent journalism is to contribute to inclusiveness and non-discrimination that are part of sustainable development.

In recent years, influential movements have been successfully challenging the status quo, and helping to ensure better gender representation in ownership, staffing and content in the production of journalism.

Points to ponder

1. *What are the success stories in regard to achieving change in media ownership and management in regard to gender equality?*

2. *What steps in regard to content are visible in media and culture outlets to promote gender equality in society such as by tackling gender stereotypes and reflecting greater diversity in content?*

3. *What lessons can we learn from media outlets that provide help to protect journalists, in particular female journalists, freelancers, and artists, from harassment and attack?*

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[12] French, L; Vega Montiel, A; Padovani, C (eds). 2019. *Gender, media & ICTs: new approaches for research, education & training.* Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368963.locale=en ; Vega Montiel, A. and Macharia, S. (eds). 2019. *Setting the gender agenda for communication policy: new proposals from the Global Alliance on Media and Gender*; Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368962.locale=en ; https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf

[13] https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf; https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/ifj-survey-two-thirds-of-women-journalists-suffered-gender-based-online-attacks.html

6. Promoting independent journalism and media online

Internet companies have afforded space for journalistic alternatives, including youth-driven innovation. This is especially significant in contexts where media is captured, and it enables more pluralistic and inclusive information environments. At the same time, Internet technologies have themselves become increasingly centralised in global Internet companies. These entities are now the main arbiters of technology-mediated communications. The world's Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression have signalled such unaccountable private control as a potential risk to freedom of expression.[14]

Many Internet business models rely on capturing user data through prolonging user engagement by means of prioritizing content that arouses emotions, and with the side-effect of downgrading the visibility of fact-based journalistic output. Further, many online channels are availed to actors who seek to sway opinions through below-the-radar and micro-targeted content. All this takes place outside of the transparent public sphere, and contrasts strongly with the value of news media's contribution to society.

The overall effect is that Internet companies have increasingly taken over a large part of the role of news media in the communications ecology. However, under public pressure, they are beginning to address the need for ethical codes aligned to international human rights standards, and effective self-regulatory systems. A number of actors have been promoting the establishment of an independent and multistakeholder social media council for Internet companies. While there remain many questions, a dialogue has started.

Points to ponder

1. *What interventions are being considered in the face of internet actors playing such a large role in communications?*
2. *What cases exist where Internet companies co-operate meaningfully with news media to help ensure visibility of independent journalism, as well as creativity and diversity of cultural expressions, and how can these be reinforced?*
3. *How can improved accountability and self-regulation by Internet companies help to resist capture of their platforms by people spreading disinformation, hate speech and hostility to journalism?*
4. *What wider funding solutions are being proposed to address market failure in regard to the sustainability of independent journalism into the future?*

7. Unshackling journalism – strengthening the conditions for independence

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[14] "Joint Declaration on Challenges to Freedom of Expression in the Next Decade"
https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/425282

The celebration of WPFD 2020 is based on a solutions-oriented approach and seeks to galvanize and empower all concerned into more powerful action. The diverse efforts at pushing back against the pressures and at securing editorial independence for journalism merit being amplified. Innovative practices especially deserve to be shared, and different actors linked up to reinforce their synergies. WPFD 2020 is the time for this to happen.

A free, pluralistic and independent media environment, both online and offline, is quintessential to upholding freedom of expression as a fundamental human right. It is a key element of any democratic society, and it accelerates progress in sustainable development. Significantly, it is also a fundamental value that mobilises many people into action. When journalists are protected by the law, when they can investigate, report and publish freely and professionally without being tied to the specific agendas of powerful elites or interest groups, and without fear of attack, then they can fulfil their democratic and development potential. They can hold power to account, promote transparency, disseminate quality information and contribute to an ethical, fact-based communications ecosystem.

In putting the focus on efforts aimed to protect independent journalism, the World Press Freedom Day in 2020 builds upon the insights and energy of the 2019 theme which sought to strengthen media's contribution to elections and the fight against disinformation. Enhancing knowledge of the current issues and efforts for change can help to keep journalism free and independent into the future.

This is the promise of policy discussions during the World Press Freedom Day 2020 and far beyond.